



HERO *of the* DISH

We sit down with celebrity chef and MasterChef judge George Calombaris to discuss family, TV and how Greek food isn't just souvlaki. Words by Yi-Hwa Hanna

To say George Calombaris is passionate about food would be a serious understatement. Anyone who has ever watched him as one of the three much-beloved judges on *MasterChef Australia*—a show that has taken the Middle East by storm—can see that this is a man whose job is a true labour of love. At the age of just 34, the father of two has won countless awards (including the Bonland National Apprentice of the Year Award when he was just 21, *The Age Good Food Guide's* Chef of the Year award in 2008 and an Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year award in 2011, to name just a few), and also owns seven restaurants—all in addition to his acclaimed MasterChef role.

Yet George isn't ready to just rest on his laurels. Ego has no place in his kitchen—despite the fact that he was named as one of the top 40 chefs of influence in the world by the *Global Food and Wine Magazine* in 2004—and he handles the responsibility of sending aspiring chefs out into the world (for better or for worse) with the utmost respect, treating many of them like family.

The Australian chef's pride in his Greek

and Greek-Cypriot heritage is evident in both his cookbooks and his restaurants: George is on a mission to help the world realise that Greek food is about more than the stereotypical souvlaki-and-gyros deals found at your local Greek diner. Instead, he gives us everything from traditional, heart-warming dishes like his grandmother used to make, to classics with an elegant modern twist, always with the intent of helping people discover *real* Greek flavour. We can't wait to jump in and take a bite.

YH *You're very well known for your role in MasterChef Australia. How did you first get involved with the show?*

GC I was invited to audition; let's just say one thing led to another and here we are now after 4.5-5 years. It's been an amazing ride; the most privileged job that I've had.

YH *It has an extremely dedicated international following, not least with your huge fanbase here in the Middle East—is this something you ever could have imagined?*

GC I had no idea that it would have so much penetration throughout the world in terms of its viewership, and ability to [touch people's hearts]. I guess I understand why now. It relates to all walks of life. It doesn't matter what religion, what colour [or] what race you're from, people can connect with it and go along for the ride!

YH *I've heard that you've recently lost about 20kg. Do you have a tendency to put on weight during a season of the show—and how do you keep that in check?*

GC Yes, definitely. You've just got to be strategic. If I know I've got a big tasting day where I'm tasting 20-30 dishes, I'm not going to have lunch. So that will be my calorie intake for the day. It's just being a lot more understanding of what you're eating, when you're eating, and how much you're eating. For me, that is critical.

YH *You've said that one of the key factors in helping you maintain a healthy weight is timing...but what if you're working late?*

GC If you're going to eat late that's fine, but be picky and choosy about what you're going to eat late. Are you going to sit down to a big bowl of carbs late at night? No, you shouldn't really because that's just going to sit in your stomach. At the end of the day, I'm probably eating more food than I've ever eaten now, and my metabolism is up, and I'm eating at the right time—so I'm eating appropriately. And I'm still eating butter [and] good fats, I'm not going to compromise on that stuff. I don't drink low fat milk, I drink full cream milk, the way it was meant to be—I eat yoghurt, I eat dairy, I eat cheese—but it's just balance.

YH *Speaking of balance, what are some of the highs and lows of your career thus far—you've won more awards by the age of 34 than most people have in a lifetime!*

GC I think all those awards are definitely little milestones along your life, where you go, "That was pretty cool"—but for me, the most amazing achievements ever are my two beautiful kids. To be able to have two healthy kids...and I'm going to be able to influence them through good and bad. I'm not perfect, and I make mistakes; I hope that I can teach my kids not to make the same mistakes. The lows... throughout your life there's certain little aspects that

“A simple bowl of spaghetti bolognese, for me, is fantastic: I don't get to eat that stuff often”

are low points. Especially in your career, [let's say] you lose a star, or the food is not where you want it to be, or people aren't coming in the door... but so far so good, though. I've been fortunate and I don't take that for granted. I just have to work harder and get better at what I do. So I don't sit still, I'm always doing something new.”

YH *So you think it's necessary to always keep sight of your goal—and who you are—to get through hard times? I've heard that you aren't impressed by egocentric chefs.*

GC Yeah, I don't think I'm successful—I don't look at myself and think “Geez, I'm successful”—I'll judge my success on the day when I retire. When I sit down on my rocking chair somewhere, and people will be wondering “Whatever happened to that bald, chubby guy on *MasterChef*, can't remember his name 'cos it was that long ago,” I'll sit there and look back over it all and think about those amazing moments.

YH *You have a pretty demanding schedule. How do you handle it?*

GC Good people. Surrounding yourself with great people, [having] an understanding... they're beside you through thick and thin. There are a handful in my group that have been with me for a very long time...without these people I'm useless!

YH *My Greek friends tell me it frustrates them how Greek food is often such a cliché. You seem determined to change this...*

GC There's no doubt about it, Greek food...

★ George's Top Tips

*Kitchen essentials
from the super chef*

A spoon is your best friend! Use it to taste.



Have a good sea salt—not a refined, bleached salt.



Buy the best ingredients you can possibly afford for the best results.



Be prepared, and follow your instinct. A recipe is just a guide, after all!



it's a Mediterranean diet, it's regional in many ways, and it has stereotype dishes, just like the Italians, the Chinese and the Japanese have them. It's breaking the stereotype. No, we're not [just] about souvlaki and fried cheese, it's about being able to educate people. I just keep hounding people again and again to break that stereotype.

YH *So the goal is to let people try different styles, to see what real Greek food is about.*

GC Yes, that, and also taking away what's hard about Greek—the language. There's a big barrier there. What's easier to say, Kefalograviera, or Parmesan? So do I tell people it's Kefalograviera? Yes, but I then put an explanation next to it so they say, “Ahh, that's a semi-hard cheese made of

goat's and sheep's milk," and they can get it and figure it out for themselves."

YH *Are your kids adventurous eaters?*

GC My kids are only 2 and 10 months old, so they're still very young—but we've got a big vegetable patch at home and James is into it, with his gumboots, picking beans and eating them off the tree, so for me that's the start of something special. He needs to know where food comes from, but in saying that, I don't care if he doesn't become a chef. He will be, [alas], in restaurants because it's my life, but hopefully that will teach him the basics.

YH *Who does the cooking more at home?*

GC At home, [my partner Natalie] does all the cooking!

YH *When you are invited for a meal at a non-chef friend's house, do they seem nervous that you'll judge their cooking?*

GC Yes! But I try and relax them as much as possible, because I'm not there to judge. When I go to a friend's house, I don't care if the steak is burned, or if, you know, the pasta's overcooked. I just simply tell them that. And most of my friends know typical things that I love. A bowl of spaghetti bolognese—that, for me, is fantastic. Because I don't get to eat that stuff often, so you know, it's the simple things.

YH *What do you do if you really don't like something they've made?*

GC Swallow it and smile!

YH *What other cuisines do you enjoy?*

GC Japanese, Italian, Thai, Vietnamese...I just love that sort of fresh, vibrant flavour.

YH *Are there any cuisines that you haven't tried yet that you'd really like to?*

GC [I've tried a LOT! But] I'd like to delve into Peruvian [cuisine] more. I've read a lot about it and I think it's very interesting.

YH *Do the MasterChef contestants and their ideas ever influence or inspire you?*

GC I think what inspires me is the fact that these are amateur cooks that are really pushing and driving themselves. You've got to remember that *MasterChef's* a funny beast—they've got to be creative every single day. We never put chefs under that kind of pressure, [saying] "Right, every single day you have to create a new dish." So that's pretty amazing.

YH *It does seem like being a chef is a very high-pressure job!*

GC It totally is. You're on your feet, [for] long hours, definitely. [It's] hard, hard work. [As a chef] you have to remember

that you're a servant, and if you can accept that you are that, and you love that, to serve people—and I do—then you'll be great.

YH *It must be hard, telling contestants when they haven't made it to the next stage.*

GC It feels terrible, terrible; I find it really hard. When they've been with you a couple of months they become like family, and you have this emotional attachment and then suddenly one by one they go. It's tough.

YH *Do you keep in touch with any of them?*

GC Yeah, definitely, and a lot of them keep in touch [too]. Simple phone call, how they're going, what they're up to...

YH *It sounds like you grew up in a family of food-lovers.*

GC Yeah, food was the centre of the table. It was the place where we'd meet to yell,

scream, laugh, cry. It's about sharing, breaking bread, everything really.

YH *Is that part of what inspired you to become a chef?*

GC Yes, totally. My grandmother and mother are big influences, in terms of that whole generosity of giving and cooking.

YH *When you're not in the kitchen, where are you most likely to be found?*

GC On the couch, watching soccer.

YH *What would your last meal be?*

GC Everything I've eaten so far.

YH *Literally?*

GC Yes, every single thing ever! I don't have a favourite dish—I can't pick, it's too hard. It's like picking your favourite pair of shoes or your favourite child! ■



Baklava Soufflé

SERVES 4

INGREDIENTS

190ml low-fat milk
20g cornflour
45g caster sugar
1 egg
2 egg yolks
Whites of 6 eggs
100g caster sugar
4 scoops smoked chocolate ice-cream

METHOD

1. In a medium saucepan, bring milk to the boil. While milk is warming, in a medium bowl, mix the cornflour, sugar, eggs and egg yolk together to form a smooth paste.

2. Pour the milk onto the paste and blend together to form a smooth paste.

3. Return to pan, bring to a simmer; whisk continuously for 5-6 minutes.

4. Remove from the heat and pour into a bowl, cover with cling film and let cool.

5. Once cooled, beat with an electric mixer on medium speed, until smooth.

6. In a medium bowl, whisk egg whites until foamy and gradually add the sugar, whisking until stiff peaks are formed.

7. Fold 1/3 of the egg white mix into the cooled milk mixture and whisk vigorously, then add the rest and gently fold in.

8. Pour into buttered and sugared soufflé moulds and bake in preheated moderately slow oven, 175°C for 13 minutes, or until the soufflé has risen to 2.5cm above the rim of its mould. Serve immediately.